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ABSTRACT

Future directions of higher education are influenced by changes that have been occurring in the life cycle and "learning cycle." Traditional ages of formal education are becoming less rigidly defined, and higher education may now be viewed not only as a pre-work ritual but also as a process to be pursued by everyone from 18 to 85. Colleges need to establish more flexible study arrangements in the undergraduate years, since mature young students often have an urge to pause before attending college, interrupt their college study, or continue education while engaging in work apprenticeships. Recurrent education for adult students could serve inmates, individuals in the military service, professionals, and people who are bored with their leisure time. Sabbaticals should be offered to all workers, not just to teachers. The intellectual needs of adult students could be served by having residence halls for retirees or apartments for people 45 and older, arrangements already implemented by the State University of New York system. For others, education could be taken to nursing homes and retirement villages. To serve nontraditional groups of students, new courses, schedules, locations, and staff attitudes need to be developed. (SW)

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THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION:

A NEW RENAISSANCE

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THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION:

A NEW RENAISSANCE

Although all rules of public speaking are against it, I must begin by making a confession. The simple truth is that I feel squeamish talking about the future, when some days I am not sure about tomorrow--to say nothing of the 1980s and the 1990s.

My confusion is similar to that of Robert Benchley, who had great difficulty during an examination at Harvard College. On that occasion, as the story goes, he was asked to discuss the arbitration of the conflict over offshore fishing rights, first, from the point of view of the British, and then the United States. Benchley paused awhile and then replied, "I know absolutely nothing about the offshore fishing dispute from the British point of view; I know even less about the position held by the United States; and I therefore should like to discuss the problem from the viewpoint of the fish."

I have gained courage from Benchley's brashness, and the "submerged perspective" of the fish fits nicely my condition. Before talking about the future, however, I should like to look briefly at the past (which, of course, is always quite clinical and safe).

Since World War II, higher education in this country has had both great progress and great good luck. During these heady, happy times, educators responded to the "avalanche of students" sparked first by the G.I. Bill and then by the baby boom. Colleges ran classes from early morning to late at night, including

Friday night and Saturday morning; federal grants came pouring in; alumni fund drives often reached the top; and the shadow of McCarthyism lingered for awhile and then faded from the scene.

Somehow, almost miraculously, America emerged from these hectic, exhilarating years with a network of colleges in America which C. P. Snow characterized as one of "the World's greatest glories." During this 33-year period (1945-1978), more college buildings were constructed than had been built during the 300 years before. The percentage of the high school population advancing to higher education shifted from 1 in 8 to 1 in 2.

Instrumental in this phenomenal progress of higher education were the nation's blind belief in education and an unprecedented expenditure of money. Incredibly, in the mid-1940s the United States spent only one billion dollars on higher education. Today the annual operating budget of the South Carolina Higher Education Commission alone is $336,945,445. The total yearly expenditure for higher education in this country is now more than $30 billion a year.

I scarcely need to remind you that times have changed. Higher education now faces what John Foster Dulles used to call an agonizing reappraisal. The postwar bulging budgets are now behind us; the baby boom has subsided to a cap gun pop; there is a dip in college applications among the high school population; and public and private institutions across the land are cutting back, trimming costs, terminating contracts and, in some cases, grimly fighting for survival.

What are we to make of this? Some propose that the time has come to fold our tents. Our colleges and universities, they say,

have passed their peak. The glory days are gone, and we must now live with something called "retrenchment" and the "steady state." Clearly these people speak the truth. As Gerry Ford said, "Bite the bullet." Higher education in America does face a major crisis, and only the careless or the misinformed could be complacent.

Our problems may, at least in part, be self-imposed. We are inclined to project upon the future some worn out assumptions from the past. In doing so, we may fail to notice that while some traditional "doors of education" are now closing, some nontraditional ones are beginning to swing open. As Dickens said, "the worst of times" can also be "the best of times" depending on our point of view, and there is some reason to believe that higher education may be entering a period of great renaissance, rather than decline.

People are now organizing their lives in ways far different from former years. Historically, the span of human life has been chopped up into slices like a great salami, with each section having a special flavor all its own. First, there was the all-too-thin slice of early childhood--the time of happy play; then a thicker slice--12 to 21 years--devoted almost exclusively to full-time learning; next, the thicker chunk of full-time work; and, finally, retirement--the little nubbin characterized by some as "dignified decline." In the life cycle just described, the successive stages of existence were kept rigidly apart, clanking along behind the others like a string of freight cars behind an engine.

Throughout the years higher education has accommodated fully this long tradition. For example: Our catalogues and brochures

were written for the young, as if students came in just for · sizes: 18, 19, 20, and 21. Classes were scheduled mainly Monday through Friday, usually 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.--colliding head-on with the world of work and assuming the student had no other duties to perform. The academic year was broken into chunks of study called "semesters," with time off in the summer so young students could go home to help their parents with the crops. College education was to be completed before young adults entered the working world, never to return.

The campus was a kind of ghetto for the young, a place where older people seemed misfits in a strange and foreign land. Older people were regarded to be retreads engaged in a kind of salvage operation, out of step with the learning cycle, if not the divinely ordained cycle of life itself.

This neatly ordered view of life, slightly caricatured perhaps, had until the recent past been locked into an iron vise of custom. But now the tidy pattern has begun to break apart and the implications for higher education are enormous. Young children, for example, now engage in learning much earlier than before and today about 40 percent of all boys and girls are enrolled in preschool programs before they enter kindergarten. "Sesame Street" and "Electric Company" have entered the home to blur the rigid time between "play" and "school" life segments.

Students of traditional college age have also changed. They are old enough to vote, and they have the right of legal contract in 43 of our 50 states. Students increasingly leave college early or enroll for only part-time study. They are finding ways to break out of the so-called "learning cycle," which seems to

them a time of endless incubation. Clearly, the so-called college-going years are now less well defined.

The adult schedule also is breaking up. Today, working people are less and less involved in earning bread five days a week from early morning to late at night. In 1900, the average work week in America was 62 hours long; it dropped to 43.4 in 1945 and today stands at 37.5 hours. Also, the four-day or three-day work week is now a serious proposition. When Springs Mills in South Carolina shifted to a four-day pattern, it was deluged with inquiries from other companies, some of which have followed suit. Merchant marine employees now have 10 days of paid vacation for 30 days at sea--a total of 3 months off every year.

Finally, there are major changes among older people, too. We hear a lot these days about how the baby boom has dwindled to a baby bust, but equally impressive is what is happening at the other end of the population curve. Life expectancy in the United States has increased from age 47.3 in 1900 to 69 years for men and 76.7 for women (of both races) in 1971. By the end of the year 2000, it is estimated that half the United States population will be over 50 and 33 percent will be over 65.

In the next ten years alone, the number of Americans over 60 will increase by 35 percent, and those in the 50-to-59 age bracket will rise by 17 percent. Further, many people in these later years find themselves outdistanced by the pace of change. They are forced into "early retirement" (as an alternative to simply being fired) with years of productivity left. This pattern is not only wasteful, but tragic in simple human terms.

The point I make, then, is this. Through most of history, the early years were times of freedom, then came formal education and, after that, came work and early death. We quite properly organized our learning in institutions to fit this rigid cycle, serving principally the young and unattached. With the birth rate declining, we now are inclined to panic at the prospects of a new depression, threatened by the loss of our "natural" clientele.

There is, however, another way to view the present scene--the glass half empty may also be half full. Even though the baby boom has slackened, there are still more people to be served. Mid-career people have more leisure time, and they face the crisis of early obsolescence. Older people now retire early, live longer and, like their grandchildren, have more free time and are socially unattached. For the first time in our history, higher education may now be viewed not only as a pre-work ritual but also as a process to be pursued by everyone from 18 to 85.

If colleges and universities redefine their assignment in this way, we need to be working on new ways to provide recurrent education, while adapting to the changing population curve. Three suggestions might be helpful.

1. More flexible study arrangements should be established in the undergraduate years. Some colleges even now have introduced a program which pre-enrolls high school graduates, then holds their acceptance while the student devotes a year or two to work or travel before coming to the campus.

Also, there is growing interest in a "step-out program," an option which grants students a type of leave of absence after several years of college before they finish their degrees. Such a

move replaces the old "dropout" stigma which (again reflecting our "freight train" view of life) assumes that to interrupt the years of study is to leave formal learning forever.

As colleges formalize "in and out" arrangements such as these, they recognize that mature young students often have an urge to pause, to interrupt the years of pre-work study, to continue education while also engaging in work apprenticeships.

2. Formal and informal learning can be mixed throughout the adult years. I do not mean some vague commitment to continuing education, a term which unfortunately seems to have lost its significance. Rather, I suggest we think of recurrent education of adult students for specific grounds, with specific programs to meet these needs.

In New York more than 14,000 men and women are in state correctional institutions, 1,000 of whom finish the high school General Equivalency Diploma (GED) each year. The need for post-high-school education among these inmates is apparent if we are to rehabilitate these people and slow the rate of return. The State University of New York has joined with the New York State Department of Correctional Services to open a college for inmates, a minimum-security prison where all inmates will be full-time college students.

Another group of prospective college students would be our servicemen and -women. In the United States more than 340,000 volunteers enter the armed forces every year, and many of these people are eager to continue formal study. The prospect of developing a servicemen's college program to serve those stationed close to campus, as well as those who are more distant, is, in my

opinion, a major higher education challenge which must be me . In South Carolina alone, five military bases are within a short distance of four-year college campuses that offer both graduate and undergraduate study.

Educating practicing professionals in such fields as medicine and law is a major challenge. Some states now expect medical doctors, nurses, and dentists to take course work before they be relicensed. Universities have a special obligation to offer the night courses at the right time and place to fill this bill.

Also, those in industry, business, and the home cannot be overlooked. Most employees now have more leisure time, and yet both employers and employees are discovering that the "absence of work" is not enough. With shorter days and longer weekends, workers often find themselves at loose ends, wandering around the house like children with chicken pox. Management finds to its dismay that increased leisure time often leads to fatiguing moonlighting jobs, that are taken not always to increase cash but often to head off boredom.

In his recent book on work, Studs Terkel observes that uninterrupted and unfulfilling work may have touched malignantly the soul of our society--repeating, perhaps, the thoughts of Camus, who wrote that "without work all life goes rotten. But when work is soulless, life stifles and dies." The special Health, Education and Welfare task force report on work in America, perhaps the best-known document on the subject, says that millions of Americans are dissatisfied with the quality of their work life.

Why not have more education agreements as labor contracts which would free workers to study in the factory, store or

laboratory? Mini-courses, seminars, and video lectures could head off obsolescence and usefully fill the leisure time. Also, why should sabbaticals be limited to a tiny minority of the academic elite? Why should not many more Americans be freed at times to refine their skills? France, for example, now requires large firms to provide all workers after five or more years with up to a year off at half pay for further education. Regardless of the precise form, I am convinced that in the days ahead the world of education and the world of work will increasingly intersect.

3. Finally, we must begin to give more than lip-service attention to the education of older men and women.

The promotion of sauna baths and shuffleboard at a St. Petersburg condominium for retired people exemplifies a patronizing view of later life, and I believe this period more and more will be seen as a most productive and rewarding time, especially enriched by formal training. One campus, of the State University of New York system, already has a residence hall filled with retirees, and another campus has apartments for people 45 and older. With fluctuation of student populations causing anticipation of empty dormitories, why cannot we join with departments of social welfare to help ease a pressing crisis--housing for the elderly--and at the same time, bring back to campuses new groups of students, a kind of "emeritus college" on campus, if you will.

The older person who cannot come to campus should not be written off. If we can go into factories and prisons, why cannot we also go into the nursing homes and the retirement villages? Why should a person, after a lifetime of productive work and experience, be allowed to vegetate intellectually simply because of the physical impairments of age?

Who will pay? The individual, of course, if he can. But we have Medicare for the body; why not Educare for the mind? The cost would be modest; the returns, in the enrichment of a difficult and often barren state of life, would be enormous.

In 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt inspired the nation with his "Four Freedoms." Now, in the words of Carl Rogers, may be the time to add a fifth: "the freedom to learn"--whatever one's age or stage of life. Such a commitment would reaffirm the proposition that learning and human dignity walk together hand in hand.

A final issue must be faced. If colleges and universities are to serve nontraditional groups of students, enormous internal hurdles must be overcome: new courses, new schedules, new locations, and new attitudes among faculty and staff. These cannot be discounted. The maintenance of academic excellence is also a central issue. Some fear that more flexible programs for older people will somehow reduce quality.

My own observation has been that quite the opposite is true. Older students are often highly motivated. They are more diligent and more sure of where they want to go. In this regard, it is fascinating to remind ourselves that before the 1890s our public libraries were not open to young people and to children. The theory was that only adults were qualified to read, to treasure books, to study on their own. The pendulum swooped, of course, but now we have the peculiar task of trying to nudge it back the other way. Some believe the greatest barrier to recurrent education is public apathy. They hold the view that more leisure time does not mean that people will engage in lifelong learning. Based on past experience, they suggest we will simply have more beer,

more Monday night football, and more Archie Bunker and J nny Carson.

I believe such pessimism should not go unchallenged. There is substantial evidence to suggest that when colleges find ways to extend their programs, older students will respond. Between 1960 and 1970, for example, the number of adults engaged in some kind of full-time college study rose from 9.6 to 25 million, almost tripling in one decade. It has been estimated that next year more than 80 million older persons will participate in some form of education.

Several years ago, when a non-campus college (Empire State College) was organized in New York, administrators were unsure of what the response would be. Currently enrollment has exceeded 10,000 students and several hundred are on the waiting list. The average age of the students is 33 years, and these students are highly motivated to move on to further study. As each new Empire State learning group opens, it has more than it can do.

One of my favorite lines is in Moby Dick when Ishmael says of himself, "I have an everlasting itch for things remote." In all of us, I am convinced, is an urge to learn. It is unthinkable at this late hour in our history that education will be viewed as obsolete. Rather, the question now before the house is this: How do we enable people of all ages to "scratch the everlasting itch"?

After all, just like wars and generals, education is much too important to be left only to the young.